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# Going Paperless: A Digital Solution to a Challenging Problem

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# Going Paperless:

## A Digital Solution to a Challenging Problem

by Maxine L. Rawlins



Photograph by David Wilson

*Functional fixedness* is a handy psychological term that describes a mindset which locks us into viewing objects (including software applications) from the perspective of their usual function. This mindset interferes with finding unique and creative solutions to problems and robs us of exciting discoveries along the way. The increasing availability of instructional technology at BSC has presented multiple opportunities for faculty to explore innovative practical applications of this technology. An exciting application of *Blackboard*, a popular course management software system used at BSC, has recently allowed the college's Counseling Programs to "go paperless."

To understand how *Blackboard*, the BSC Counseling Programs, and overcoming 'functional fixedness' relate to each other, an overview of the Counseling Programs will be helpful. We offer five distinct programs: three at the Masters level (Mental Health Counseling, School Guidance Counseling, and Higher Education Counseling) as well as a Certificate in Advanced Graduate Studies (CAGS) program in Mental Health Counseling and a Post Masters program in School Guidance Counseling. The Counseling Programs prepare students to work with children, teens, and adults in a variety of settings, such as mental health centers, health care centers, hospitals, schools, and a range of higher education settings. The five Counseling Programs must follow multiple state and national licensing bodies and standards. Regulations can change quickly and information must be transmitted rapidly, accurately, and efficiently to students.

The majority of matriculated students in the Counseling programs are between the ages of 25 and 50, have families and/or full time jobs, and may travel as much as four hours round trip to attend classes. Some of our students are the first in their families to attend graduate school or even college; others are recent returns to higher education, having completed their undergraduate education ten to twenty years ago. For many, coming to campus during traditional office hours is not a simple or spontaneous act, but one which may require careful negotiation around job commitments and baby sitters' availability.

Our students focus on their academics at times which are most compatible with their lifestyles and non-academic responsibilities and commitments—whether that be at 9 PM, midnight, 6 AM, and/or on weekends. They continue to want and need timely and easy access to program documents and accurate program-related information. Although students have always had their own impressive informal grapevine, too often the information transmission process resembled the game of "telephone," where the final message bore only a slight resemblance to its original form. At times, the student rumor mill ran rampant, requiring periodic damage control. Although the Counseling Programs had attempted to address this issue by transmitting information through our course instructors and academic advisors as well as through the use of periodic mass mailings, we knew that more had to be done in this area.

Necessity became the mother of invention, which led us to decrease our own *functional fixedness*. A desire to enhance communication with students, increase student ownership of their own educational process and sense of "connection" with their academic program, and decrease common barriers that commuting, working and other "non-traditional" students often encounter, led us to consider *Blackboard* to help us achieve these goals.

### WHAT IS *BLACKBOARD*?

During the summer of 1999, a system-wide course management software system called *Blackboard* was introduced to campus. The college's Information Technology staff provides excellent support for the system in the form of student and faculty training and technical assistance, as well as ongoing system maintenance and upgrading. We approached the BSC User Support and Academic Services staff in October 2001 with the idea of "going paperless." It quickly became clear that *Blackboard* could handle the additional demands that would be placed on it to address the needs of the Counseling Programs and our students at no additional cost to the college.

## WHY COURSE MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE? WHY BLACKBOARD?

Although *Blackboard's* primary use on campuses has been course management, several of its features make it attractive as a vehicle for communication and dissemination of other types of information and documents. First, it is cost effective. For campuses that are already using course management software systems, a training, technical assistance, and support infrastructure, which can be utilized at no additional cost to students or to the college, already exists. Second, the software can be accessed both on and off campus. Students can log onto the system from their homes, workplaces, or public libraries. *Blackboard* also offers multiple electronic communication options. E-mails can be sent to every "enrolled" student at the touch of a button. The system has additional communication options which support cohort building and increase the students' sense of connection with other students as well as with faculty and staff.

*Blackboard* makes it possible for students to have "24-7" access to electronically available information and program documents. From this perspective, the Program/Department office is virtually always open. This is particularly compatible with the lifestyles and needs of nontraditional, working, and commuting students, and addresses many of the accessibility issues that such students often encounter.

### CHALLENGES

We did run into some challenges in implementing this system. Our students and faculty range from technophobes to those who possess significant skill, familiarity, and confidence with technology. Getting *all* already matriculated Counseling students to buy into and participate in the system was an additional challenge. At the end of October 2001, a one time hard copy mailing was sent to all matriculated Counseling students informing them about the move to "go paperless." The mailing also provided students with activation and enrollment instructions, informed them of the orientation training schedule, and gave them a 3-week "window" in which to complete the two-part activation process and to enroll onto their Counseling Program-specific *Blackboard* site. Although many students did comply with the request, several "Johnny (and Janey) come lately's" did not, only to surface later. We also



realized that it was critical for the Counseling Programs to provide hands-on training for students every time a new component of the Program was put on the virtual site.

We repeatedly were reminded that the greatest system will not be successful if students do not regularly access the site. While missed deadlines and lack of timely course or Program information became implicit "sticks" for students, our experience highlighted the greater importance of providing ongoing "carrots" for students to enroll in and access their program-specific sites and their BSC e-mail weekly. Information that served as incentives needed to be added to our virtual site on an ongoing basis, "rewarding" students who regularly checked their site and their e-mails. Examples of successful "carrots" were job postings, scholarship and grant opportunities, reminders of important upcoming deadlines, and new course offerings.

After the initial anxieties about "going paperless," most Counseling students now rely on the system to provide them with up-to-the-minute information. The learning curve has been dramatic; students quickly catch on to the system. They often bring their discs containing graduate program planning or fieldwork information to advising meetings for review and updating. Faculty creativity has increased as our own *functional fixedness* has diminished. Faculty continue to come up with additional ways to more fully utilize our virtual system, such as linking students to important on and off-campus sites, and creating an internship site database for students to peruse from the comfort of their own homes. For a program that began half a century ago, we've come a long way!

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